

## *Massachusetts*, 1791



A fanciful rendition of the first *Massachusetts*? Note the ensign and the commission pennant which were not adopted until 1799, well after the first *Massachusetts* was sold out of service. This painting may actually depict the second cutter named *Massachusetts*, which served from 1793-1804.

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TYPE/RIG/CLASS: Schooner

LAUNCHED: 15 July 1791

DECOMMISSIONED: Sold 9 Oct 1792

DISPLACEMENT: 70 <sup>43/95</sup> Tons

PROPULSION: Sail

LENGTH: 60' 9" overall

BEAM: 17' 8"

DRAFT: 7' 8"

ARMAMENT: 6 swivels?

COMPLEMENT: 4 Officers, 4 Enlisted, 2 Boys

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**Remarks:**

Although little documentation exists regarding any of the first ten cutters' activities--most of the correspondence and logbooks from the era were destroyed by fire when the British Army burned Washington, DC (including the Treasury Department building in which these records were stored) during the War of 1812 and another fire at the Treasury Department in 1833 (through no fault of the British this time)--these government vessels undoubtedly carried out a myriad of tasks. Many of these duties were spelled out in letters from the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, to the various collectors of customs, who were in direct charge of the cutters and their crews. The duties specifically assigned to the cutters and their crews as legislated by Congress and expounded by Hamilton included:

- boarding incoming and outgoing vessels and checking their papers (ownership, registration, admeasurement, manifests, etc.)
- ensuring that all cargoes were properly documented
- sealing the cargo holds of incoming vessels
- seizing those vessels in violation of the law

They were also tasked with a number of other duties that were not related to protecting the revenue. These included:

- enforcing quarantine restrictions established by the federal, state or local governments
- charting the local coastline
- enforcing the neutrality and embargo acts
- carrying supplies to lighthouse stations
- carrying official (and unofficial) passengers
- other duties as assigned by the collector

Their primary purpose, however, was to protect the revenue of the new nation by deterring smuggling. That meant sailing out of the port to which they were assigned and intercepting vessels before they came too close to the shore. It was here, well out of the harbor but within sight of the coast, that smugglers unloaded part of their cargoes into smaller "coaster" vessels or directly onshore

to avoid customs duties. The collectors usually had smaller boats that could check vessels as they sailed into port. Therefore these ten cutters were not harbor vessels; they were designed to sail out to sea, survive in heavy weather, and sail swiftly so that they might overtake most merchant vessels. They were the nation's first line of defense against attempts to circumvent the new nation's duties, the country's major source of income during this period.

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### **Cutter History:**

*Massachusetts* was one of the first ten cutters. She was built in Newburyport and served out of Boston. A contemporary description, provided by the Collector of Customs at Boston, Mr. Benjamin Lincoln to the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, noted:

"Agreeably to your orders I here send you a description of the Cutter *Massachusetts* built at Newbury port in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in the year 1791. She has on [sic: one] deck, two masts her length is sixty feet above her upper deck her depth is seven feet Eight inches, breadth seventeen feet eight inches she measures seventy tons 43/95. She is a square-stern schooner, has quarter badges, an an Indian's head for figure-head. She has a long quarter deck and a deep waist." (1)

Dr. John Tilley noted that "the *Massachusetts* was a two-masted schooner of 70 43/95 tons burden, 60 ' in length, with a beam of 17' 8" and depth of hold of 7' 8". The ship had a long quarterdeck, deep bulwarks, and an armament of either four or six swivel guns. The contract signed by Searle and Tyler called for two boats and seven sails: mainsail, foresail, jib, flying jib, fore topsail, main topsail, and squaresail." (2) The cutter ended up being larger than originally authorized as her first master, John Foster Williams, ordered an increase in her size without first seeking departmental approval. Her cost was therefore considerably over the original estimate. Nevertheless, the government accepted her as built. Although she was launched later than a number of other cutters, by tradition she is considered to be the first to actually enter active service. (3)

There are a number of surviving documents regarding her history. A journal, kept by Second Mate Nathaniel Nichols, has turned up and gives a glimpse of what life was like on this cutter. He faithfully recorded his thoughts and actions from 31 October 1791 through 16 June 1793.

"No Revenue Cutter in Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's 'system of cutters' saw shorter Federal service than the first [cutter named] MASSACHUSETTS, a 70 ton schooner built in Newburyport, Massachusetts in 1791. One of the first ten armed vessels of the United States ordered to patrol the the Atlantic Coast to protect the revenue, she was too costly to please

Alexander Hamilton, too expensive to operate to please General Benjamin Lincoln, and too slow to please her Master, Captain John Foster Williams. They sold her in October 1792 and replaced her the following spring with a smaller, livelier cutter, the sloop MASSACHUSETTS II." (4)

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### **Commanding officers:**

Captain John Foster Williams, Master; 1791-1792

### **Original Crew:**

First Mate Hezekiah Welch of Charlestown, MA  
Second Mate Nathaniel Nichols of Cohasset, MA  
Third Mate Sylvanus Coleman of Nantucket, MA

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### **Notes:**

1) As quoted in: Florence Kern's *John Foster Williams' U.S. Revenue Cutter Massachusetts, 1791-1792 To Stand the Trials,*" (Washington, D.C.: Alised Enterprises, 1976), p. 3; Stephen H. Evans, *The United States Coast Guard, 1790-1915, A Definitive History* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1949), pp. 13-14.

2) *Massachusetts* Cutter File, U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office; text accompanying drawing of the *Massachusetts*.

3) Howard I. Chapelle, *The History of American Sailing Ships* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1935), p. 181.

4) Kern, p. 1.

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### **Sources:**

Donald Canney. *U.S. Coast Guard and Revenue Cutters, 1790-1935*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995.

Howard I. Chapelle, *The History of American Sailing Ships*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1935.

Robert Dixon, Jr. "Captain Gross's Arms and Stores." Coast Guard Academy Alumni Association The Bulletin (April-May 1966), pp. 95-100.

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U.S. Coast Guard. *Record of Movements: Vessels of the United States Coast Guard: 1790 - December 31, 1933*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1934; 1989 (reprint).

